

# Irish Republican Politics: A Film and Gender Analysis of the 1980's Hunger Strikes

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Ireland has had a disturbing and fascinating history of civil conflict, culminating in a climactic peace treaty that was signed in 1998. The infamous Troubles first erupted in the 1980s, mainly in Northern Ireland, and leaves a melancholic legacy. Film and television have explored this conflict, the list includes, *Belfast*, *'71*, *Some Mother's Son*, and *Derry Girls*. These various films and shows have attempted to parse out the nuances of the Troubles, generating empathy for those affected by the tumultuous times. In more detail, the conflict was stoked between differing ideologies, that are still active today. Moreover, the conflict has not been truly resolved, merely placed on hold.

The people of Northern Ireland, for the most part, still adhere to either republican and/or loyalist ideologies, undoubtedly due to the intensity of the sectarian conflict that took place in the 1980s. While imprisoned for various crimes relating to the conflict, many prisoners engaged in hunger strikes. When and how they did this, and the measure of its success was mitigated by numerous factors, not the least of which was gender. The aspect of interest in this paper is regarding the political resistance of the republicans, who were imprisoned for alleged terrorism throughout the Troubles. During the period of the 1980s and onwards, protests involving hunger striking were employed by republican women and republican men to gain political status as prisoners.

The focus of this paper hopes to unpack the historiography of political hunger striking and gender. The use of hunger strikes has feminist roots that goes beyond the republican prisoners' movements of the 1980's: however, some stories have been highlighted and celebrated more readily than others. By comparing gender and hunger strikes in Ireland, we can generalize larger themes of patriarchal expectations in political resistance movements. To explore these themes, the paper will compare two different films, *Hunger* and *I, Doolours*. By using these films as a microcosm of embellished historiography, we can understand the macrocosm of larger

historiography patterns in society. In understanding how history and film collide, we understand how the confines and constructs of society dictate what historical stories we reinforce and re-tell ourselves to protect established gender roles.

The first film that explores the male side of hunger strikes is Steve McQueen's film, *Hunger* (2009). *Hunger* depicts the harsh reality of the H-Block prisoners and the subsequent hunger strike through the eyes of Bobby Sands, who is one of the more famous actors within the striking movement. Sands is depicted as stoic, stubborn, and justified in action, an earlier hunger strike has failed to secure the republican prisoners' political status. Sands leads the second attempt, knowing that he will die. *Hunger* shows in graphic detail the violence the prisoners endure, the brutal dehumanization, and resilience of the prisoners.

It takes a runtime of forty-five minutes till Bobby Sands speaks to a priest about his future hunger strike.<sup>1</sup> The choice of restricting dialogue could be seen as a demonstration of masculinity itself. The film presents Sands shirtless, with his thin body glistening in the prison's light, the smoke from the cigarette curls dramatically around his beard. These scenes somewhat deified and glamorize Sands as a heroic figure. The static medium shot is backlit and is the only continuous dialogue of the film that lasts twenty-two minutes of the film's run time. This film is concerned with showing how brave Sands was, how determined he was, even in the face of death.

*I, Doulours* is a documentary film (2018) interested in exploring the timeline and motivations of Dolours Price. Price is interviewed on camera and recounts her involvement in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) member and her hunger strike in a British prison. Dramatic re-

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<sup>1</sup> *Hunger*, directed by Steve McQueen, 2008.

enactments are played with her narration. The actor is conventionally beautiful with a short dark-red haircut. There is a high quality to the documentary film, the lighting is dark and serious. Dolours speaks of the nationalism that ran down the matriarchal line, and eventually speaks to her doubts about her involvement within the IRA. Furthermore, Dolours details the hunger strike and the force-feeding she endured, and the subsequent eating disorder she suffers with after her imprisonment.<sup>2</sup> She is eventually released from her life sentence after 8 years due to "mental instability". The end of the documentary notes her death at 61 years of age. The film displays her victimization throughout her life, and the consequences that followed.

Although both films have a heavy and serious tone, *Hunger* has overt expressions of a specific and almost hyper masculinity. *I, Dolours* seems more interested in understanding who Dolours was, what sexism Dolours faced in the IRA and in prison, and her remorse for being involved with the IRA. One film depicts the inevitability of hunger strikes. The other film depicts the consequences of being involved with IRA activities and civil war. Using these gender comparisons, I argue that patriarchal values are still deeply entrenched in what behaviours are considered acceptable within Irish republican resistance. In applying this to hunger strikes, we can understand in a broader sense why particular stories are celebrated while others are questioned. Additionally, I argue that gender may influence what is remembered or forgotten in the hunger strike canon, and indeed more broadly in our collective historical memory.

### *Hunger Strikes: The Gendered History*

Hunger strikes have been used as protest long before the wide media coverage of the 1980s; this method of protest had been much recorded earlier, including back in the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *I, Dolours*, directed by Maurice Sweeny, 2018.

century.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it was adopted first by mainly female prisoners during the suffragette movement to achieve feminist rights.<sup>4</sup> However, the importance of these efforts has often been minimized or disregarded throughout historical narratives.<sup>5</sup> Instead, what started as a female led protest has been co-opted into masculine heroics. This is seen in the political murals throughout the 1980's onwards in Northern Ireland, which have mostly only highlighted the male hunger strikers.<sup>6</sup> Even in anecdotal conversations with republican historical tour guides, the male protestor undergoes a deification process, while the females are paid brief lip-service.<sup>7</sup> Reverence and respect are paid to some of the women; however, most acknowledgement, attention and detail is devoted to understanding the male strikers' stories.<sup>8</sup>

In actuality, the roots of political hunger strikes are found in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when an ample collection of women mobilized across British prisons to access the right to vote.<sup>9</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political party Sinn Fein even commented that hunger striking was a "womanish thing."<sup>10</sup> During those protests, legislation was drafted to combat women's attempts to protest their conditions. One example of such legislation is called the "Temporary Discharge

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<sup>3</sup> Miller, Ian. *Experiencing Hunger Striking: Remembering the Maze Prison Hunger Strikes* in Irish Review (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020) (23)

<sup>4</sup> Miller, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Whalen, Lachlen. *"A Womanish Thing": The Price Sisters and the Gendered Dimensions of Irish Republican Hunger Strikes in England 1973-74* (St. Thomas: University of St. Thomas, 2019) (95)

<sup>6</sup> Rolston, Bill. *Women on the Walls: Representations of Women in Political Murals in Northern Ireland* (Northern Ireland: Ulster University 2018)

<sup>7</sup> Collins, Lorcan. In discussion with the author, June 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Collins, Lorcan. *Revolutionary Ireland* (Apple Podcast 2020)

<sup>9</sup> Miller, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Whalen, Lachlen. *"A Womanish Thing": The Price Sisters and the Gendered Dimensions of Irish Republican Hunger Strikes in England 1973-74* (St. Thomas: University of St. Thomas, 2019) (97)

Act for Prisoners of Ill Health", colloquially known as "The Cat and Mouse Act" of 1913.<sup>11</sup>

Under *the Cat and Mouse Act*, which female protesters would be released from prison due to poor health, only to be reimprisoned again after regaining their strength.<sup>12</sup> The effect of the law was to undermine their efforts to protest effectively. Moreover, force-feeding tactics were used throughout British prisons to further undermine the strikers' efforts.<sup>13</sup>

During the Irish Civil War, there were at least 24 different hunger strikes led by women in jails, with at least 219 female participants in total.<sup>14</sup> Around 55 female strikers were at the Kilmainham gaol, demanding that the republican prisoners be released.<sup>15</sup> These strikes helped shock and shape the political landscape of prisoner resistance. Part of the force of the protest arose because the female body was seen as meeting the national need of reproduction.<sup>16</sup> These strikes resulted in increased prisoner privileges, and sometimes even early release from prison.<sup>17</sup>

Although there are many primary source writings on hunger strikes during the Irish civil war, the canon has mostly focused on male writers' experiences.<sup>18</sup> The women who did write about their experiences often stifled their voices by tactics such as deflecting their experience, or by focusing only on more famous strikers.<sup>19</sup> Other times, the women strikers would focus on the male strikers' experiences as opposed to mentioning their own experiences.<sup>20</sup> Some female

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<sup>11</sup> Political Status 1914. (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Crumlin Road Gaol Experience, n.d.)

<sup>12</sup> Whalen, 99.

<sup>13</sup> Aiken, Siobhira *'The Woman's Weapon': Reclaiming the Hunger Strike in the Fiction of Dorothy Macardle, Mairead Ni Ghrada and Mairin Cregan* (Galway: Journal of War & Culture Studies, 2021) (91).

<sup>14</sup> Aiken, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Object Label, Kilmainham Gaol, *Letter from Elsie Murphy on behalf of the Republican Women Prisoner's Council to the Governor of Kilmainham Gaol, 29 June 1923*. Dublin.

<sup>16</sup> Aiken, 91.

<sup>17</sup> Aiken, 91.

<sup>18</sup> Aiken, 92.

<sup>19</sup> Aiken, 92.

<sup>20</sup> Aiken, 92.

writers of the era would retrospectively write the experience of hunger strikes in non-fiction through male characters. This includes authoring plays with male leads or writing under male pseudonyms.<sup>21</sup> These tactics were necessary as often the female writers would have their works rejected for publication if written from a female perspective.<sup>22</sup>

Within the longstanding history of hunger strikes, the fact that it was an adopted tactic for female prisoners is apparent. How did hunger striking evolve from a "womanish thing" to a quintessentially nationalistic, and hyper-masculine Irish ideal.

### *An Exploration of Bobby Sands and Dolours Price*

Bobby Sands died on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1981, after a 66-day hunger strike. Sands's is considered heroic because of his election as an MP while imprisoned. He was 27 years old when he died of starvation.<sup>23</sup> The murals and materials on Bobby Sands are numerous. In Derry and Belfast there were dozens of memorials dedicated to the H-Block prisoners who died on hunger strike.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, there were several large murals dedicated to Bobby Sands alone. Bobby Sands was a poet, storywriter, songwriter, and kept a journal in prison for the first 17 days of his hunger strike.<sup>25</sup> He also had a love for Rod Stewart and David Bowie, was a community activist, and loved sports such as cross-country. Bobby Sands also held high regard for the female hunger strikers, referencing them in his journal: "I wrote some more notes to the girls in Armagh today. There is so much I would like to say about them, about their courage, determination, and unquenchable spirit of resistance."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Aiken, 93-97.

<sup>22</sup> Aiken, 105.

<sup>23</sup> *Bobby Sands*. Bobby Sands Trust, accessed July 12 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Derry Murals, *H-Block Bobby Sands*. Derry, Northern Ireland. Seen by author 21 June 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Collins, Lorcan. *1980/1981 Hunger Strikes Part 1*. (Podcast: Revolutionary Ireland, June 27, 2021)

<sup>26</sup> Sands, Bobby. *Prision Diary*. Bobby Sands Trust, accessed July 12, 2024.

However, in the film *Hunger*, audiences get no sense of Sands's respect for the female hunger strikers, or even Sands's common humanity. Instead, the audience gets a one-dimensional character who is single-minded in his pursuit for prisoner status. The sense of nationalism is contrasted with the disembodied voice of Margaret Thatcher, the only woman who speaks in the film.<sup>27</sup> Director Steve McQueen effectively captures the seriousness of the strikes in the film *Hunger*, but the film is devoid of the complex humanity of Bobby Sands. McQueen only highlights the trope of masculine heroics of the hunger strike carried out by Sands. Thereby reinforcing harmful masculine gender stereotypes while ignoring the importance of the female strikers. This narrative effectively cleanses audiences any notion of female participation within the republican struggles.

Exploring the second aspect of gender, we turn to Dolours Price's story. Dolours Price died of an overdose January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013, after living a quiet life in Dublin. The hunger strike she participated in lasted 208 days and took place in a British prison after she was convicted with a life sentence. Prison doctors forcibly fed Dolours for over 100 of those days before she was transferred to Armagh Gaol.<sup>28</sup> It took 8 years of prison time before she was released due to her failing health. While there were four murals during the 1980's that announced, "free Marian Price" (Dolours sister who was also imprisoned at Armagh Gaol), there were no murals for Dolours.<sup>29</sup> Personal details about Dolours are sparse, and the documentary does not focus on any information regarding her individual humanity. The documentary focuses more on her family

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<sup>27</sup> Merivirta, Raita. *Remembering Otherwise: Media Memory, Gender and Margaret Thatcher in Irish Hunger Strike Films*. (Finland: University of Turku, 2023) (290)

<sup>28</sup> Sweeny, Maurice. *I, Dolours*. The Irish Film Board. (2018)

<sup>29</sup> Rolston, Bill. "Women on Walls: Representation of Women on Walls in Northern Ireland." *Pure.Ulster*, December 1, 2018. (23)



indoctrination and the traumas she endured, which serves to highlight a victim narrative. Dolours did contribute some writings for a newspaper called *Fortnight*, including a brief article condemning her alleged IRA colleague-turned-parliament-leader Gerry Kelly.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, Dolours was published in *Fortnight* reviewing the book *Only the River Runs Free*,

"This is not a 'hate men' book – I only wish it were because we could then surely take the extent of its truth as being on the drawn out side [*sic*]. It is the truth of how women cope in Northern Ireland in their marriages, their religion, their poverty and in war. It is a tribute to their survival and a litany against the institutions which demand too much of them. This book is all our story."<sup>31</sup>

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In the documentary, Dolours speaks to the sexism she experienced within the IRA and lists names of accomplices and victims. Dolours notes that informants against the IRA would be sentenced to death, and she was part of the team that would "disappear" those informants. There has been controversy surrounding the release of the interview tapes that were used in the documentary *I, Dolours*. It seems that Dolours and Marian were not as favoured within the historical memory of Northern Ireland republicanism. There was little anecdotal knowledge of Dolours, and often I was verbally redirected to investigate more popular female strikers (who

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<sup>30</sup> Price, Dolours. *Gerry Kelly: He's Not the Boy I Loved*. *Fortnight* September 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Price, Dolours. *Survivors of Religion, Marriage, and War*. *Fortnight* October 1984.

died in action) such as Mairead Farrell.<sup>33</sup> Mairead Farrell was also featured in blanket protest on a mural in Derry.<sup>34</sup>

While *I, Dolours* takes a more empathic approach in giving historical context to Dolours' decision to join the IRA, it still paints a bleak picture of her choices. In contrast with the film *Hunger*, the stark difference is potent. *Hunger* does not express or explain the context to the men protesting. No historical background is given. Instead, it drops its audience into the perspective of the victimizers (the prison guards) and the victimized (the prisoners). One film glorifies the actions of the male IRA prisoner's resistance, and the other film is concerned with the consequences of participating in paramilitary life. Bobby Sands is lifted as a hero and a martyr, whereas Dolours Price is highlighted as a remorseful victim and victimizer.

#### *A Historical Narrative Approach: The Remembered and Forgotten*

Throughout the IRA movement, women have been both recognized and celebrated. This can be seen, for instance, through the loving memory of female led resistant groups such as the *Cumann na mBan* via statues of the Countess Markievicz in Dublin, or murals in Northern Ireland.<sup>35</sup> Republicanism is a proud and nationalistic group with tones of the underdog rising against colonial and imperial regimes of Britain; however, what stories are re-told are dependent on gender specific historical narratives.

One author, Bill Rolston, wanted to capture the gender role differences through observations of who is represented in political murals in Northern Ireland. Rolston compared republican and loyalist murals to better understand the difference between gender representation

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<sup>33</sup> Niall (Bloody Sunday Tour Guide) in conversation with author. June 24, 2024.

<sup>34</sup> As seen by author, Derry Northern Ireland, June 21, 2024.

<sup>35</sup> As seen by author, Dublin, and Northern Ireland June-July 2024.

for each group, what content was in the murals, and the general themes. Rolston collected data from photographs of murals from 1981 and onwards, they noticed that republicans, over loyalists, feature women more often.<sup>36</sup> However, the content of the republican female murals tended to skew towards traditional female roles to support the male heroics as opposed to representing female republican volunteerism.<sup>37</sup> In more detail, out of a collection of 1320 republican murals, only 272 portrayed women: just 21%. By contrast, loyalists' murals, a collection of 1078 murals, only 53 portrayed women: just 0.5%. Republicans are no strangers to celebrating their female counterparts, but only in cursory fashion.<sup>38</sup> Regardless of the lip-service paid to some women, historical narratives still lean heavily on the male striker's story.

This becomes glaringly obvious when visiting Ireland and Northern Ireland when many of the historical tour guides (21 tour guides in total, 16 were male) focus on male hunger strikers. Furthermore, the street murals tend to mostly depict male hunger strikers, and the museum exhibits focus heavily on the male experience of republican resistance.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the women who are featured seem to be a select few, such as the Countess Markievicz in Dublin and more recently, Mairead Farrell in Belfast.<sup>40</sup> Contemporary culture is still heavily invested in the "great man" and "some great women" narratives.<sup>41</sup> This is echoed in Hollywood media by the very existence of the film *Hunger*. The film reinforces a cultural choice as to whose stories matter, and which stories are worth telling. Moreover, the tone and emphasis of *Hunger* reinforces a

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<sup>36</sup> Rolston (16).

<sup>37</sup> Rolston, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Rolston, (13).

<sup>39</sup> As seen by author, Ireland, and Northern Ireland. June 4-25, 2024.

<sup>40</sup> As seen by author, June 4-24, 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Mennill, Sally (Lecture). *History and Film: Social History and the Potatoe Famine*. May 14, 2024.

potentially harmful type of masculinity, one in which violence, unemotional stubbornness, and stoic behaviour are portrayed as necessary in the fight for independence.

Dolours Price's very existence is fraught with controversy and shame. She is depicted as betraying the IRA by revealing her male comrades, the inner workings of the organization, and the sexism within the movement through the interview tapes that are used in the documentary.<sup>42</sup> She admitted to participating in war crimes by speaking on "disappearing" alleged informants. She did not die in active service, or on hunger strike in prison. Instead, she was released due to mental instability. Even Dolours Price's overdose could be interpreted as a symptom of her trauma. Dolours paints a picture of the consequences of her involvement with republican nationalism. Her regret and remorse almost stain the rampant "positive" masculine nationalism. Culturally, it makes some sense to uphold Bobby Sands's story and discount that of Dolours Price's. Bobby Sands's story can be seen as heroic, with a "clean" narrative of masculine victory. Dolours story, on the other hand is messy, displaying the complications of war, the violation of one's body and autonomy, and female suffering without arriving at a clearcut victor. Her narrative clashes with the republican pride that is so cherished and romanticized in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

### *Conclusion*

In understanding how the patriarchy dictates our current historiographic lens, one only needs to see how much material is dedicated to understanding the male hunger striker. Men are upheld and celebrated in the historical narrative of hunger strikes and the resistance of colonial rule. Bobby Sands is fully realized in history; his story uplifted, murals painted, podcasts and

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<sup>42</sup> I, Dolours, 2018.

websites dedicated in his honour. The questions surrounding why Dolours Price has been left out of that narrative are complicated. Partially there seems to be cultural resistance against women like Dolours, who take autonomy over their bodies. Moreover, when women strike, they are set free due to fears of death by starvation. There is further shock when women fight in the republican movement, as this goes against what is expected of womanhood: a sort of passive, non-violent supporter of male efforts. The fact that hunger striking was considered a woman's protest and was quickly appropriated as a masculine ideal rest upon who is allowed to die for the cause, and who is considered mentally ill for even trying to resist.

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